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Strategic Insight

Will the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict Impede the War on Terrorism?

by [Glenn Robinson](#)

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The current round of hostilities between Israel and the Palestinians has the potential to greatly complicate -- and perhaps thwart entirely -- the War on Terrorism. A spillover of the Palestinian conflict into the larger region would threaten the stability of Pro-American regimes and would play right into the hands of regimes and groups hostile to American interests in the region. How did we get to this point?

The newest Israeli-Palestinian fighting began in September 2000 when then-opposition leader (now prime minister) Ariel Sharon made a provocative visit with 1,000 Israeli police to the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem -- a site considered holy by Muslims around the world. Sharon's stated goal was to assert permanent Israeli sovereignty over the entirety of Jerusalem, including over Muslim areas and shrines. Sharon's ulterior motive appears to have been to undermine then-prime minister Ehud Barak's peace proposals (which included allowing for some Palestinian control in Muslim parts of Jerusalem), and to thrust himself and his Likud party into power. Sharon's gambit worked, but not without a heavy price.

Sharon's move infuriated the Palestinians, who were in any case primed for a fight following the collapse of the peace process in July 2000. While Sharon provided the spark, it was the failure of the Oslo peace process that really explains the current hostilities. The Oslo peace process -- so named because of the secret talks between Israelis and Palestinians in Oslo, Norway, that started the peace process in 1993 -- was supposed to finally end the century-old conflict between Israelis and Palestinians through a "land for peace" formula. That is, Israel would withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza Strip (lands it had occupied since 1967) in exchange for full peace and diplomatic recognition. Solving the core problem of the Arab-Israeli conflict would then naturally lead to a regional settlement, it was realistically believed.

For Palestinians, the peace process was more about process than peace. While many agreements were signed and negotiators kept busy, Palestinian land continued to be confiscated, illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank continued to be built, and settlers-only roads were constructed on Palestinian lands at a break-neck speed. In fact, during the seven years of the Oslo peace process, the number of Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip doubled, to about a quarter million. Continued occupation, not peace, was the reality for most Palestinians. Even after seven years of "land for peace" the Palestinians only controlled about 15% of the West Bank -- and less than that now. Finally, the Israeli vision of peace presented to the Palestinians at Camp David in July 2000 was of a peace that kept most settlers in place, that created a "Swiss cheese" Palestinian state completely surrounded on all sides (and through the middle) by Israel, and ignored the Palestinian refugees who had been expelled from their homes when Israel was created in 1948. In short, Palestinians were seething and ready to fight when Sharon presented them the opportunity.

For Israelis, the peace process was supposed to bring not only peace but security. Instead, Palestinian rejectionists, primarily from the Islamist organizations Hamas and Islamic Jihad, ushered in a new era of Palestinian suicide bombers (a tactic learned in the early 1990s from Hizbullah fighters in Lebanon). Periodic terror attacks by Palestinians led to the deaths of far more Israeli civilians during seven years of "peace" than had been killed during the preceding six years of uprising (the 1987-93 Intifada). In one

week alone in early 1996, four separate suicide terror attacks by Hamas and Islamic Jihad resulted in 70 Israeli civilian deaths, and traumatized the Israeli public. Finally, Israelis have a much different view of why the peace process collapsed. Most Israelis believe that their government made a generous peace offer at Camp David, and Yasir Arafat's rejection of it proved that he was never serious about making real peace with Israel.

Kept at a relatively low level of violence, the current crisis can be contained and managed, albeit as a constant headache for the United States and friendly regimes in the area. The fear is that the conflict will escalate and spill over into the larger region. Such escalation could be done by design as a policy response by one or the other side; for example, skeptics believe Sharon (much like Saddam Husayn in Iraq) has a political interest in keeping the fires burning hot. Escalation could also be accomplished by groups outside the control of Israel or the Palestinian Authority. For instance, if Jewish terrorists finally succeed in blowing up the Al-Aqsa mosque (they've tried before), or if Hamas assassinates the Israeli prime minister and Israel responds with unprecedented retaliation, then the region would likely explode politically.

The issue of Palestine is the defining element in the Arab world's wide distrust of American policy. The United States can expect to bear the brunt of anger in the region if the conflict escalates and spills over into other countries. Under those circumstances, even friendly regimes would be forced to distance themselves politically from the United States, particularly when it comes to joint efforts in the War on Terrorism. For example, King Abdallah II in Jordan has spoken out in support of the War on Terrorism, and pledged Jordan's cooperation. However, Jordan's population is about 60% Palestinian, a historical legacy of the Israeli expulsions of 1948 and 1967. Under current conditions Abdallah has to walk a fine line between his pro-American foreign policy (which includes a 1994 peace treaty with Israel), and the suspicion of U.S. intentions held by most of his people. An explosion of violence in Palestine may threaten the very stability of the government in Jordan; it would certainly bring a halt to Jordan's cooperation in the War on Terrorism.

Jordan's is not the only regime whose stability and pro-U.S. foreign policies would be threatened by an escalation in violence between Israel and the Palestinians. Leaders of Egypt and Saudi Arabia are especially vulnerable to domestic discontent over the Palestine issue.

The outbreak of violence has put the United States in a conundrum. The Bush administration has responded on two levels. First, and in recognition of how spillover would negatively impact the War on Terrorism in the Middle East, the Bush administration has attempted to contain the level of violence and prevent it from spiraling out of control. Pressure has been put on both Arafat (publicly) and Sharon (usually privately) to cool things down. Containment has also included a number of diplomatic moves to calm Arab fears, including an open call for establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

At a second level, Israel has argued, as have a number of U.S. administration officials, that the conflict is really just another manifestation of the problem of terrorism. Seen in this light, Palestinian violence is seen as illegitimate terrorism and not as legitimate resistance against foreign occupation -- which is how most Arabs and Muslims view it.

From a U.S. policy perspective, viewing the current conflict through the lens of containment is often at odds with viewing it through the lens of terrorism. The first approach means pressuring both sides toward restraint, has significant diplomatic and political aspects, and is more acceptable regionally. The second approach sees Israel as doing locally what the United States is doing globally against terrorism, with the resulting strong tilt toward Israel by the United States, and greater risk of regional blowback against U.S. interests and personnel.

The challenge before the Bush administration is to figure out a way to ensure that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians does not impede the ability of the United States to carry out larger and more important goals in the Middle East and the Muslim world. It will not be easily done.

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